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ABSTRACT

Action research can be an effective strategy to help school-based professionals build a knowledge base that connects classroom practice and classroom theory. Action research does not build theory and is generally not transferable; rather, it examines why something is happening or might happen in a particular setting and circumstances. Action research can be an excellent tool for inservice and preservice teachers to become not only effective practitioners but knowledgeable professionals. Efforts at four institutions to involve teacher education students in action research types of activities are described: Saginaw Valley State University (Michigan), SUNY Plattsburgh (New York), Central Washington University, and Jacksonville State University (Alabama). These examples illustrate that action research helps students in both undergraduate and graduate programs to (1) target an area of interest, (2) look closely at that area of interest by gathering and analyzing some data, and (3) draw conclusions and make recommendations based on the data analysis. (Contains 19 references.) (ND)

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# ACTION RESEARCH: A STRATEGY FOR BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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## Introduction

Linking theory to practice in teaching has long been a goal of teacher preparation institutions, school-based professional development programs, professional associations, and in many cases, teachers themselves. Quite often it seems that the link is weak, or even nonexistent. Some programs seem to be either overly theory-based, with little attention to practice other than on-campus clinical experiences such as micro-teaching; or, the focus is on site-based practice with little attention to theory. Teachers, and school-based professionals in general, want to know "what I can do with this tomorrow;" consequently, the theory or "the research" that supports what "this" is may not be of great importance because theory is frequently viewed as disconnected from reality (Best & Kahn, 1993; Brown & Rose, 1995; Borg, 1987).

There is a tide, however, which expects that school-based professionals need to know not only the practice of education, but be able to articulate that practice as well. They need to be, as Eisner (1991) claims, connoisseurs of the profession. Similarly, Berliner (Brandt, 1986) speaks of the "expert" teacher and the characteristics that consider a teacher "expert" about teaching. State and national legislators, people calling for school reform, and, most importantly, the public being served by schools are expecting that classrooms be led by knowledgeable professionals who remain current and understand classroom practice and demographics (Dana, 1995; Herrick, 1992; Goodlad, 1990).

A problem faced by school-based professionals, however, is that there does not seem to be an effective strategy that helps them to appropriately build a knowledge base that connects classroom practice and classroom theory. The position we have is that

action research provides such a strategy. Krathwohl (1993, p. 642) points out, however, that action research does not build theory and is generally not transferrable. This is probably the best argument for action research. School-based professionals, especially teachers, are not particularly interested in theory-building or generalizing to other situations or settings; on the contrary, they are interested in knowing why something is happening (or might happen) in their setting and circumstance.

Teaching is often an isolated profession. Teachers spend most of their time in classrooms, and consequently, interaction with other professionals about issues other than the everyday, sometimes mundane, matters that occupy a teacher's time can be nonexistent or, at best, rare. Action research projects provide school-based professionals with opportunities for interaction with colleagues and other professionals in an intellectually stimulating environment which provides a forum for sharing opinions. By so doing, teachers mature as professionals because they are involved with the analysis of their own practice. We believe that action research is an excellent tool for providing opportunities for in-service and pre-service teachers to become not only effective practitioners but knowledgeable professionals. We present the following three reasons:

1. Action research is experiential learning, and, as such, may possibly be the best way to help school-based professionals understand the relationship between theory and practice.
2. Action research is a process that involves practitioners (i.e., school-based professionals) in the active investigation of school and classroom practices and issues.


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3. Action research provides practitioners with accurate information for decision-making purposes.

**Action Research in Practice**

The balance of this paper will present an overview of efforts at four of the institutions to involve their students in action research types of activities. A factor that becomes immediately evident when examining the types of projects that the institutions involve their students with is that there is a broad assortment of activities that can be identified as "action" research. Action-type research projects at the various institutions include the following:

1. Saginaw Valley State University

Undergraduate projects include such experiences as a pen pal project in a language arts methods class where students at the university communicate with early elementary (grades 1-3) students via e-mail. Students exchange "letters" throughout the semester; at one point the elementary students visit the university, after which the methods students visit the elementary classrooms. The purpose of the activity is threefold. First, it provides a vehicle for university students at the beginning of their teacher preparation program to understand the nature of the early elementary student over a period of time; second, it provides the early elementary student an opportunity to practice their writing skills and get immediate, positive feedback. The third purpose is to introduce university students to creative ways of using the microcomputer. A second e-mail project involves two university secondary introductory methods classes (one in Michigan and one in Indiana) in discussing

issues affecting secondary education and experiences in secondary education classrooms. The purposes are much the same as the language arts project, except the dialogue is between university students only and students do not edit each other's writing or visit the campuses.

A third action research activity provides opportunities for teacher preparation students who are identified as "exceptional" by faculty in their programs to develop a project, implement the project in a school-based setting, and evaluate the success of the project. This is all done under the direction of a mentor teacher and university faculty. Additionally, students in all methods courses (elementary and secondary) observe teachers and students in rural, urban, and suburban settings and analyze the similarities and differences in reflection journals.

At the graduate (master's) level, students in a course that focuses at the maturational changes of the middle grades youngster and the effect of those changes on classrooms, survey students in grades five through eight. The purpose is to (1) assess changing behavior patterns across the grades concerning physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development, and (2) to make suggestions for curriculum change and instructional practice in their middle grades classrooms. Also, each teacher education master's level program has "capstone" courses in which the students design and implement an action research project. Completed projects are usually bound, and students present their findings in a forum open to faculty, students and other interested persons, and the public.

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2. SUNY - Plattsburgh

At SUNY-Plattsburgh, an in-service program has been implemented to motivate middle grades students to improve their reading performance. The purpose is to develop new skills and a new approach to teaching reading to middle school students in a university setting.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the use of sports' trading cards to motivate young people's enjoyment and participation in their literacy development (Farris, 1995; Mackay, 1991; Osina, 1994). Sports' trading cards contain a wide variety of player-related information that covers most of the content areas and which can be used to stimulate and instruct children who are eager to learn and practice their new literacy skills.

During the summer of 1995, graduate (master's level) students studying in the Reading Center at SUNY-Plattsburgh were able to develop a number of literacy projects involving action research with middle school students. The graduate students made use of the Thinking/Learning (T/L) System (Edwards & Sparapani, 1995) to motivate the young people and to generate learning experiences for them from a variety of trading cards dealing with different sports.

The T/L System incorporated and used the considerable research showing how the brain actually functions when processing information (Caine & Caine, 1994; Hart, 1983; Restak, 1984). Also, the T/L System involved the six categories from Bloom's taxonomy (i.e., Knowledge, Comprehension, Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation, and Application) and encouraged teachers to choose which category

they would like to use with the thinking strategies they were trying with the middle school students.

Through the use of the sports' trading cards, the middle school students were highly motivated to perform. The Thinking/Learning System allowed for creativity, innovation, and flexibility, to ensure each student was responding, engaging, and using a variety of thinking processes in their learning experiences.

3. Central Washington University

Action-type research activities at Central Washington University have included the following: (1) circulating questionnaires in the public schools to learn about how English is taught. This is a project being conducted by students in introductory English courses; (2) surveying middle grades teachers to determine cooperative learning practices in order to guide initiatives in the schools and districts surveyed; (3) a project to locate Internet resources for mathematics teachers. The project focussed at determining the needs of mathematics teachers in using the Internet for purposes ranging from curriculum development to just plain "surfing the net;" (4) thesis-type-projects for completion of master's programs.

4. Jacksonville State University

At Jacksonville State, action research projects are used primarily as a part of the education specialist program for education administrators. Students, usually in groups of four to six, design and implement a project, assess the projects success, and present findings in an open forum. Projects are bound and distributed to participants in the specialist program, as well as to interested faculty.


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## Conclusion

Action research appears to take many forms. Basically, its emphasis seems to focus at helping students in both undergraduate and graduate programs to (1) target an area of interest, (2) look closely at that area of interest by gathering and analyzing some data, and (3) drawing conclusions and making recommendations based on the data-analysis.

The education arena is changing rapidly (Duhon-Sells, 1995). The public expects educators to be knowledgeable about the profession and to be able to articulate that knowledge (what Eisner, 1991, refers to as "connorsseiurs"). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) and Farnan and Fearn (1992) point out that practices need to be established that encourage school-based practitioners to go beyond instinct and connect theory to practice. Action research projects, both long-term and short-term, appear to provide such a vehicle. It seems imperative, though, that as teacher educators we also help teachers deal with the political ramifications that may occur (discussed in Dana, 1995) as teachers become more knowledgeable and attempt to influence change in their situations.

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